

Princeton University, like many institutions of higher learning, was transformed after World War II by an increase in both student population and campus construction. Architecturally this transformation was not immediate, and in fact, it was not until the 1960s that a decisive break was made with the university's prevailing Collegiate Gothic tradition. In examining this era in Princeton's history, one building in particular emerges as the embodiment of the collective apprehension regarding campus change during the Modern era.

Initially, buildings constructed in the postwar era simply continued the stylistic themes of the early 20th century. Architects and firms that had reached prominence several decades earlier, like those of Aymar Embury II and

O'Connor & Kilham, contributed competent buildings to the campus that respected the existing context and continued to make use of the established Collegiate Gothic style, at least on the exterior. Throughout the mid-century, Princeton remained largely a campus of ornamented masonry construction.

Firestone Library, designed by O'Connor & Kilham, was technically the first building to usher in a new

MOVING MODERNISM:

Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson Hall



Edward S. Corwin Hall, previously Woodrow Wilson Hall, after arriving at its new site in 1963. Photo: Princeton University Library.

Modernist sensibility. Completed in 1948, it fused a finely detailed Collegiate Gothic exterior with an elegant, minimalist interior. A true compromise between the accepted norm and the popular vogue, it did little to move the campus forward, architecturally. It was not until the construction of a new building for a young and important component of the university that a (nearly) clean break with historicism was made. Woodrow Wilson Hall, today known as Corwin Hall, represents Princeton's first true foray into Modernism.

Woodrow Wilson Hall was constructed to house the Woodrow Wilson School, which had been established in 1930. The school honored U.S. president Woodrow Wilson who had served as the university's 13th president from 1902 to 1910; its program was designed to prepare students for leadership roles in government and business, both domestically and abroad. By 1948, with the introduction of a graduate degree program in public affairs, the school had outgrown its space in the former Arbor Inn Club building and the university budgeted \$500,000 for its replacement. The building committee selected the New York firm of

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Voorhees, Walker, Foley & Smith to design a new building, with principal emeritus and Princeton alumnus (class of 1900) Stephen F. Voorhees providing supervision. Voorhees was also a trustee and had served as the university's supervising architect from 1930 to 1949.

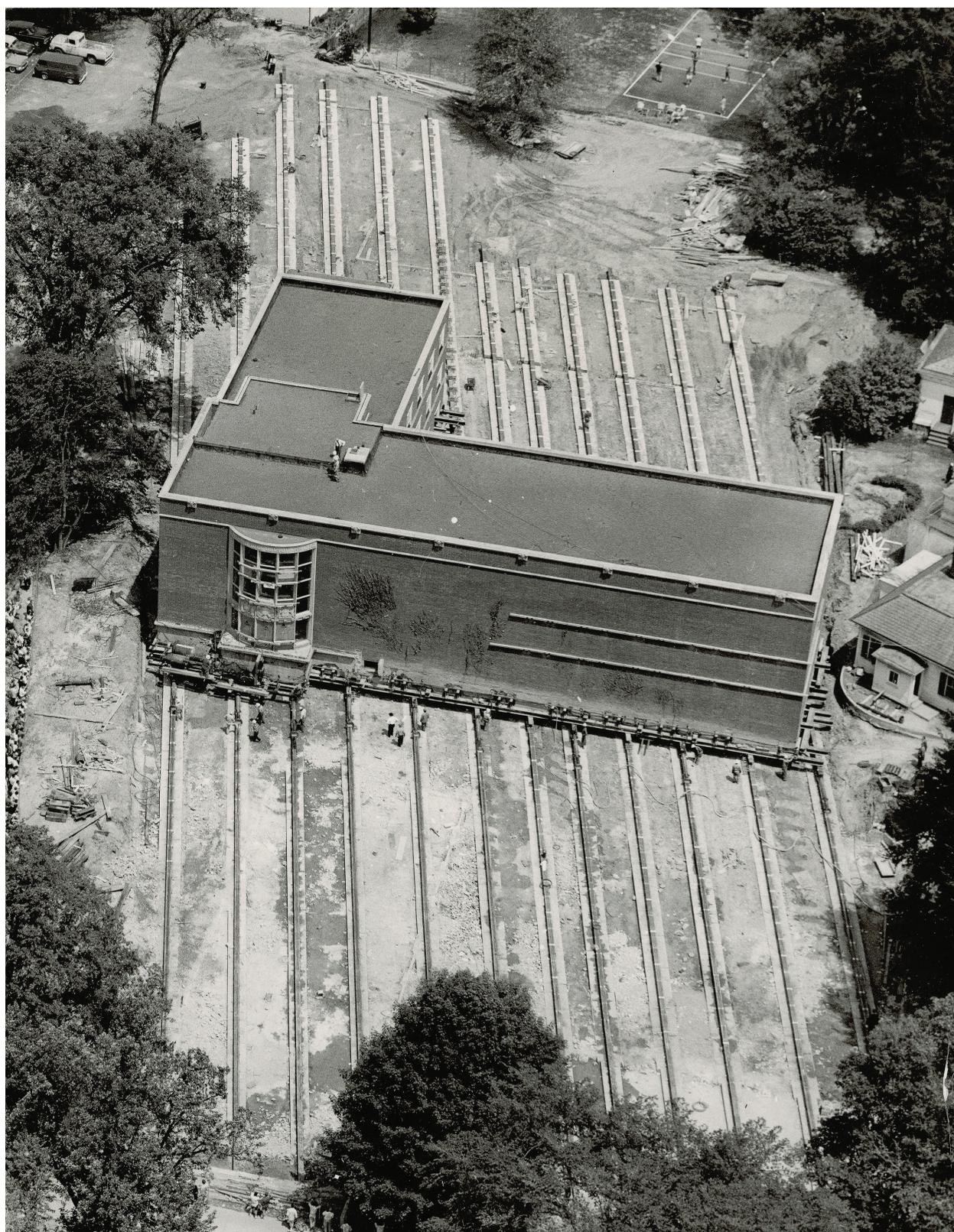
The three-story, L-shaped structure was designed to occupy the northeast corner of Washington Road and Prospect Avenue, with its principal entrance located on Washington Road, facing the important east-west campus axis, McCosh Walk. Unlike the campus buildings that had preceded it, the Woodrow Wilson building was nearly ornament-free on both the interior and exterior. Side and rear elevations were punctuated by regularly spaced, minimally detailed windows, while the main façade

along Washington Road was an unrelieved sea of red brick. The only embellishment was at the entrance. A full-height, curved bay of glass and limestone featured three heraldic panels representing the three sectors of Wilson's career: university, state, and nation. Other than the materials, the vaguely Collegiate Gothic composition of the bay was the only thing that linked the new building to the well-established and much revered aesthetic tradition of the Princeton campus. To the rear of the building, within the L formed by the two wings, was a small garden defined by brick and bluestone retaining walls and a diagonal walkway. On the interior, the focus was on a large, two-story conference room; the remainder of the building was given over to seminar and preceptorial room and a small library.

Response to the new Modern structure, some elicited before its construction, was not entirely positive: "Distinct disapproval from students of architecture and equally distinct lack of comment from their professors greeted the appearance of pictures of the proposed Woodrow Wilson Hall yesterday," reported the *Daily Princetonian*. (Woodrow Wilson Hall was not the only new campus building to face criticism at the time; an editorial the next day referenced recent designs for Firestone Library and 1915 Hall.) While some felt Wilson Hall too closely resembled a factory, others felt simply that it did not fit the existing campus: "Although it could not

be said that the new SPIA [School of Public and International Affairs] home blends with its surroundings, it does have meaning. What could be a more fitting memorial to the Southern background of our late great president than to have the building in his honor resemble a cotton factory?" Also criticized was the siting of the building, which was seen to limit opportunities to extend McCosh Walk across Washington Road.

Wilson Hall was dedicated June 16, 1952, in a ceremony led by Princeton's president Harold W. Dodds. Honored guests included Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, the President's widow; Mrs. Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, his daughter; and the Honorable Bernard Baruch. Interestingly, Voorhees spoke at the event and weakly defended the building's appearance,



May 20, 1963. Woodrow Wilson Hall moves 296 feet northeast in 13 hours. Photo: Princeton University Library.



Woodrow Wilson Hall's conference room was designed to evoke the dignified spaces of the United Nations Headquarters. Photo: Princeton University Library.

in particular the largely unadorned brick wall that faced Washington Road. Voorhees noted: "The reason should be obvious to you...Washington Road is one of the busiest roads in Princeton. Furthermore, it was desirable to have light on only one side of the conference room, so that there would be a blank wall for displays and the like...If you don't like blank walls, I'm sorry. I like them."

The "blank" elevation of Wilson Hall would face Washington Road for just eleven years. The success of the program necessitated an expansion, and a \$35 million gift to the university made construction of a new building possible. The university president, Robert Goheen (1957–1972), directed one of the most active and architecturally progressive eras of construction on the campus in the university's history. The mandate to create a new home for the Woodrow Wilson School saw the opportunity to erect a Modern landmark that could rival the best midcentury work at Princeton's peer institutions.

Detroit architect Minoru Yamasaki received the commission for the new building, which would house the principal activities of the school, while the original Woodrow Wilson Hall would function as a support building, housing the Department of Politics and the school's Center of International Studies. At this point in his career, Yamasaki had already designed Harvard's Engineering Sciences Lab (1962) and William James Hall (1963), but had yet to create the work for which he would ultimately become best known, the World Trade Center (1970–1977). Whether it was Yamasaki's decision to locate his building at the corner of Washington and Prospect is not clear, but once the university decided to proceed with the commission, plans were underway to relocate Voorhees' Wilson Hall. While the building was not well loved, it was barely more than a decade old, and the prospect of demolition would surely have seemed wasteful and inappropriate.

The moving of the 3,500-ton building was undoubtedly one of the most exciting—and carefully executed—moments in Princeton campus history. Thoughtfully planned and carried out by the New York-based engineering firm of Spencer, Prentis & White, the relocation on May 20, 1963, took Wilson Hall 296 feet to the northeast along 12 steel tracks in only 13 hours. Photographic documentation was plentiful and crowds of spectators

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looked on from a variety of locations. According to one report, several university officials and engineers in business suits observed and participated in the move from the roof of the building itself.

In 1965, as the new Yamasaki building neared completion, Princeton renamed the newly sited building Edward S. Corwin Hall and amended the stone inscription above the entrance. (The name honored Dr. Corwin, an authority on U.S. constitutional law, who for a decade had served as the first chair of the school’s Department of Politics and had recently died.) Corwin Hall officially settled into its new location as a backdrop for Yamasaki’s dramatic white colonnaded temple, which later became known as Robertson Hall. Princeton University had officially and quite definitively shifted its architectural focus from Collegiate Gothic to Modern. This shift would be reinforced by the construction of such buildings as Edward Larrabee Barnes’s New South (1965), Steinmann Cain & White’s Jadwin Gymnasium (1968), and I.M. Pei & Partners’ Spelman Halls (1973). Today, Corwin Hall stands as a reminder, albeit moved from prominent view, of that uncomfortable transition in both Princeton University’s and America’s architectural history.

— MEREDITH ARMS BZDAK

Author’s note: This article was inspired by recent work on Princeton University’s 2026 Campus Plan and conversations with Ronald J. McCoy, Jr. (University Architect) and Natalie W. Shivers (Associate University Architect). Numerous discussions with Michael J. Mills, FAIA (Mills + Schnoering Architects) have helped to shape my understanding of the campus and the role that Modernism has played.

Left: Materials—primarily red brick with limestone—along with the ornamented curved bay of the entry, were the only features linking Woodrow Wilson Hall to its Collegiate Gothic neighbors. Interestingly, when the name of the hall had to be recast in 1962 the Gothic lettering style was retained. Photo: Princeton University Library.

